

Visit to Clearwell Caves
18th June 2003-06-19
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Clearwell Caves has always been one of the places most closely identified with 'The Changes' because of the lasting image of 'Merlin' which closed every episode. The rock itself was a construction of the BBC special effects department but the cave in which it was located is known as 'Old Churn' and is part of a network of caverns open to the public at Clearwell in the Forest of Dean.

Followers of the series are supremely fortunate in this respect. 'Old Churn' was not originally accessible to all when the filming was done back in 1974 but has since been made so. The family that run the attraction – Ray and son Johnathan have cleared out the area Ray originally opened the place in 1968 and it is wonderful that they have remained in charge ever since ensuring a continuity that has preserved memories of the actual filming itself. Johnathan, himself only a teenager when 'The Changes' was made, showed me round, pointing out the now blocked off entry where Nicky came into the cave and the area where Merlin actually stood. He remembered the series well and he and his father had kept signed mementoes from the cast and newscuttings from the time. The one disappointment I had was that I didn't have chance to look through these when I visited.

Back in 'Old Churn' the prospect filmed by the BBC has unfortunately vanished – victim to the demands of the HSE that a pillar be constructed to secure overhanging rock before the public were allowed in. However in all other respects, the mine workings were still in their natural state and all the more haunting for that. Several other film crews have been along since. Nowadays the mine also hosts Halloween parties and many group visits as well as a Christmas display that looks great from the shots I saw of it.

The highlight of the day was yet to come though. Having instructed me to meet him by a large rock pool of very cold and clear water, I got a glimpse of Merlin himself. The Wright family never throw anything away and part of the original stone constructed by the BBC has lingered in an underground store room unseen for nearly three decades. From the large chunk I saw, it was obvious that the original design was several sections that interlocked to make it complete before being painted over and stood up with suitable illumination in the 'Old Churn' cave. For any devotee of this masterpiece of drama, this was a once in a lifetime !



The entrance to 'Old Churn' as the public see it today. Nicky's entrance was slightly to the left of this and is now blocked up although it can still be seen from within the cave.

Nicky and Merlin get acquainted in 'Old Churn' cavern at Clearwell, 1974



The main player as he appeared in the series

